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## Impact of the Korean Entertainment Industry on the University Life of Korean Heritage Students

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, the Korean entertainment industry has been gaining global popularity through shipping Korean pop music and dramas overseas. I first encountered the industry in my first years of high school when I became interested in a specific Korean idol group, Dong Bang Shin Ki. Shortly after hearing a few of their songs, I became so intrigued by the idea of Korean culture and language that I applied for a scholarship to study abroad in South Korea for 3 months. While I was there, I became even more immersed in the music and television programs that were currently taking half of the world by storm. Upon returning to America, I began to wonder what the effect of this entertainment industry was on Koreans living in America. The University of Illinois has a large amount of Native Korean and Korean American students in attendance, so I decided this would be the perfect place to get an answer to my questions on the topic. Specifically, I wanted my interviewees to answer three major questions in my research:

1. Are you a fan of the Korean entertainment industry?
2. How do you think the entertainment industry has affected the lives of Koreans and their perceptions on gender roles?
3. Has your interest or disinterest in Korean entertainment impacted your ability to make friends with other students (Korean and non-Korean)?

From my personal experience, I had an idea that the Korean heritage students I interviewed would state that the entertainment industry had a large impact on their lives. As I had assumed, the Korean entertainment industry had an impact on the daily lives of each of the interviewees in multiple

ways depending on their level of interest in the music or dramas.

## **Methods**

My interviewees were a range of Native Koreans and Korean American students at the University of Illinois between the ages of 19 and 24. Out of the seven interviewees I talked to, five were raised in Korea while the other two were Korean Americans. Two men and five women were interviewed throughout the process. I conducted my interviews both online through Facebook and email and in person. Around half of the interviewees were friends or acquaintances I met through theater groups on campus. I was fully aware that many thespians (those involved with theater) have a particular mindset which might make a person look deeper into programs like dramas to find symbolism contained therein. For this reason, I asked my first few interviewees to direct me to any Korean heritage students they knew who would be interested in helping my research.

Since most of my interviews were conducted online, I did not need to record them in any other way than saving the conversations. This seemed like the most efficient way to quickly get responses and catalog them without the fear of forgetting any important details. For the same reasons, I typed the only live interview simultaneously while conducting it. I chose to do this in order to save direct quotes from the original source before I could have any chance to forget them.

Though each interviewee was involved in different organizations and had different friend groups, they were all aware of the impact Korean entertainment had on the lives of Koreans in general.

## **Findings**

Since most of my interviews were conducted online, I only had one chance to analyze the body language and reactions of an interviewee. This one interview left a lasting impression on the rest of my research; it was the first interview I ever conducted on the topic.

It was a cold evening for early April. The dormitory cafeteria was filled with students

comfortably lounging in sweatpants and hooded sweatshirts. After waiting for a few minutes, my friend Audrey<sup>1</sup> sat down at the booth across from me, dressed in a short-sleeved, form-fitting t-shirt. Her hair and makeup were perfectly done up unlike many of the young women surrounding us. I asked her if she was ready to answer a few questions about the entertainment industry in Korea and she seemed to tense up slightly. “Give me a minute to grab some food.” Audrey seemed to be somewhat reluctant to share her opinion knowing that I would actually record her imminent rant. On many other occasions she had discussed her perception of the manipulative market that the entertainment industry creates without any hesitation, but today seemed much more serious. Throughout our discussion, I learned that lately she had been feeling distanced from many of her Korean friends on campus due to her adverse views towards the music industry and promotions of boy and girl groups. Since many Koreans highly enjoy the culture of the idol groups and their fan bases, my friend said she definitely feels more Americanized than many Korean-Americans she knows on campus. Between aggravated responses, Audrey hurriedly ate her dinner without much satisfaction. The most important point the young woman seemed to stress about the problems with the Korean entertainment industry was the way it has shaped the Korean people's perception of beauty. Even though she disagreed with the industry for the most part, I could tell that it had made the same impact on her that she disliked seeing in others. On this relaxed and lazy day, she had still taken the time to make up her eyes in a way to attempt to make them seem slightly wider and her hair was perfectly curled. For the third or fourth time, she reminded me that her mom has been pressuring her to get double eyelid surgery in Korea. “No one looks Korean anymore.” She commented disdainfully.

Audrey's criticisms mirrored common complaints of many Koreans who believe that the entertainment industry is shaping Koreans to emulate idol stars. Audrey, like many other woman throughout Asia, feels the desire to look fashionable in a way “inspired by the style of female Korean

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1 All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of interviewees

film and music idols” (Zheng). This will be examined in more depth in the analysis section of my paper.

The other interviewees, especially those who were Native Koreans, seemed to have a much more positive view of the Korean entertainment industry. One senior, Patricia, stated that the Korean entertainment industry provides products that are enjoyable because they are extremely “family-safe and educational.” This was a complete change from everything Audrey had to say regarding the music industry in Korea. As Patricia continued, I realized that she was only discussing Korean dramas in relation to the entertainment industry. She and many other interviewees seemed to avoid mentioning the controversial music industry and focus on the side of Korean entertainment that contains “family ideals and values, Oriental tolerance, filiality of the young to the old, principle of trust between friends, or ideal of honesty” (Zheng). At least most of the interviewees mentioned the music industry long enough to answer that it had somewhat changed the perception of beauty in the country or made women feel the need to be a certain way for men to like them. Patricia on the other hand, responded that she did not think that the entertainment industry had any effect on the changes in the societal role of each gender. I am not sure what exactly could be the cause of this response; whether she is denying something she believes or if she just does not agree with the majority of Koreans I talked to.

Even without thinking that the entertainment industry changed the viewpoints of Koreans in general, Patricia still agreed with the rest of my interviewees in saying that it had an impact on her life. Since coming to America to study, she had stopped watching/listening to as much Korean entertainment. This made her feel some of the same alienation that Audrey had mentioned to me. Unlike both of these young women, Alicia, Rebecca, Jimmy, and Daniel all felt that the global popularity of Korean entertainment helped them make friends. Either it gave them common interests with other Korean heritage students or it helped them connect to non-Koreans who were curious about Korean culture due to hearing about Korean entertainment.

## Analysis

From the range of responses to the industry itself, whether it be criticism or excitement to discuss popular programs and groups, it was obvious that each interviewee was greatly affected by the Korean entertainment industry in a varying ways. Common criticisms about the industry's manipulation of the Korean population's perception of beauty mentioned by Audrey have been the topic of many academic articles including the article we read by Sharon Lee. Like Audrey, many people say that the entertainment industry has changed the perception of beauty in a bad way; they feel required to undergo plastic surgery to look more Westernized. Sharon Lee argues this in her article on the geopolitics of beauty in South Korea by stating that “Korean women are attempting to look like other Korean women...Korean and Asian American women strive not to emulate whiteness so much as to emulate the looks of Korean actresses and pop stars” (Lee). I do not believe that this is any better than altering your looks to appear more western. Either way, Koreans are feeling that they are no longer beautiful unless they look like what the media portrays. This answers one of my main questions of whether the entertainment industry changes the Korean heritage student's perception of the world. According to practically all of my interviewees, Korean women are affected by the media in a way that makes them desire to change themselves. This is confirmed in the readings from Sharon Lee on plastic surgery in Korea (no matter if the goal is to look Western or not).

The readiness or hesitation for interviewees to answer certain questions throughout the interview was also very telling. Those who answered more quickly were often also the ones who stated that they enjoyed the Korean entertainment industry and that their interest helped them find friends at the University of Illinois. As one would then expect, those who hesitated (like Audrey at the beginning of our interview) usually had some problems with the entertainment industry and found themselves feeling alienated from Koreans on campus. This personal effect of the Korean entertainment industry

was somewhat unexpected. Common interests are obviously an important part of making friends, so when you focus on the most popular interests among a group of students, it would be hard to connect if you do not also follow that specific interest. It is similar to a child who, in our day and age, never played or heard of video games. It would likely be difficult for them to understand many modern references in different types of media. Nostalgia, which often brings people together, would not be plausible for someone who did not have the same experiences as a child. Patricia experienced this in a very definite way by losing the connections to Koreans as she began to stray away from Korean entertainment.

## **Conclusion**

Through my findings, I was able to determine that both Korean-Americans and Native Koreans feel the impact of the Korean entertainment industry in their daily lives. Most find that the music industry changes the Korean perspective of beauty and gender roles for women. This can then make the Korean women feel pressure to get plastic surgery to look more like the stars and idols they see. Possibly even more importantly, Korean heritage students find that their interest or disinterest in Korean entertainment changes how easily they can make friends at the University of Illinois. This proves that South Korea is far enough in globalization that Americans (and other non-Koreans) know enough about the country that they are interested in South Korean entertainment. This leads them to try to connect with Korean heritage students through a common interest in Korean pop music and dramas. This, along with the popularity of the entertainment industry among most Korean students, makes many friendships base themselves around Korean entertainment knowledge and enjoyment. In short, Korean heritage students are affected by the Korean entertainment industry in many different ways throughout their time at the University of Illinois.

## Works Cited

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